

Prop Roots

Vol. II

Hermits

from

The Mangrove Country of The Everglades



3.95

Prop Roots

Vol. II

Hermits

from

**The Mangrove Country
of The Everglades**

Acknowledgements

For assistance in preparing this book special thanks must be given to the Collier County Historical Society for the help given to our initial endeavor and the encouragement to continue with Prop Roots, Vol. II; to Sammy Hamilton, owner of Everglades Transportation for the use of a van; to Jo Ann Kreider for typing all our work; to all the many people who donated their time to reminisce with us and especially to the hermits who welcomed us into their private lives.

Larry and Jeri Green

Prop Roots



Prop Roots of Mangrove trees

Which came first - the Ten Thousand Islands or the mangrove trees?

Without the support of the lowly mangrove trees the Ten Thousand Islands might easily be reduced to perhaps only ten. The aerial prop roots which extend tentacle-like from the main trunk are the very life-blood of the island. Since the Ten Thousand Islands, of which Everglades City and Chokoloskee are but two, owe their very existence to the mangrove tree and its "roots that walk," it is felt that this project, too, is supported by Prop Roots.



Walking through the Everglades to visit Martha Frock, a hermit.

**The Everglades City High School students
involved in this project are:**

Katy Ballance
Cindy Collins
Della Collins
Kathy Corkrean
Julie Davidson
Mitchell House
Tami Hurley
Tod Johnson
Jenny Kreider
Jon Kreider
Cheryl Lewis
Randy McMillian
Joy Moore
Mary Platt
Betty Posada
Valerie Wheeler
Michael Woods

The original volume of Prop Roots was devoted to food and cooking; the way the local people have learned to enjoy the natural bounty that surrounds. Prop Roots, Vol II is devoted to people of the area who have become known as hermits.

Most definitions of hermits state that hermits are persons who live alone, away from other people and have abandoned society—perhaps for religious reasons. We studied the lives of seven hermits as well as hearing about other hermits of the past. In no case was religion mentioned as a reason for seeking a life away from civilization. Nor did any of “our” hermits avoid people or seem to dislike being around people. On the contrary, they seemed to enjoy visitors and were friendly and more than willing to discuss their chosen life style.

Mr. Seely, the hermit of Dismal Key, has become a very special person to the students involved in this project. He was always willing to talk with us, to allow many pictures of his home to be taken and supply information he thought would be helpful.



Al Seely — the hermit of Dismal Key

Juan Gomez

One of the first reported hermits in the Ten Thousand Islands was Juan Gomez, who it is said, was born on the island of Maderia, Southwest of Spain, in 1778. Gomez said that he sailed with the infamous pirate Gasparilla but was ashore at Boca Grande when Gasparilla sailed out to his final defeat in 1821. Gomez saw the pirate ship sink under the waters of the Gulf and not wanting to be captured by the United States government, he escaped southward in a yawl and hid for a while on Panther Key. But in 1925 he was picked up by a coasting schooner and taken to Havana.

After several years in Cuba, he came back into American territory where he claimed that on Christmas Day, in 1837, he fought in the battle of Lake Okeechobee in the Seminole War. After this battle he went to Cedar Key where he herded cattle until 1855. At the age of 77, Gomez returned to Panther Key in the Ten Thousand Islands.

W. T. Collier, who owned the General Store at Marco, and lived there with his family, mentioned around the year of 1870 that he had noticed that Gomez, while living on Panther Key, was often gone from his island for weeks at a time. Gomez had a small sailing sharpie (boat) and hinted that he had gone to locate buried treasure. He also told Collier he had been away to hunt a wife.

In 1884 Gomez returned from a trip and had a woman with him. He said he and the 78 year old lady had been married in Tampa. Nothing was ever learned about his wife's background.

The fame of the old man of Panther Key increased during the period of time from 1880 to 1890. Every year a few fishermen stopped to interview the old fellow and listen to his tales. He told different stories at different times. He loved to tell about his years as a pirate and hint that he knew where pirate treasure might be found under a rock or the roots of a gumbo-limbo tree. For a dollar or two, he would even sell a crude chart showing where treasure might be found.



Mr. Seely and Digger examining the remains of a wooden barrel, believed to be one of the few physical remains of property belonging to the past hermit of Panther Key, Juan Gomez.

About 1890 a man named Sampson Brown went to Panther Key and offered to build the old man a sturdy house from the timbers of a wrecked ship. What Brown wanted in return was a promise of squatters rights to the whole island. At this time Gomez was around 112 years old and Brown was in his 50's. Things did not work out the way Brown expected, since he died at least eight years before Gomez did.

In July of 1900 when, according to his records, Gomez was 122 years old, he went out in his boat to fish. Apparently, his feet somehow became entangled in the net for he was found by fishermen, drowned, entangled in the net by his drifting boat.

Gomez was perhaps the first and most colorful hermit to live near the Everglades in the Ten Thousand Islands, but he was certainly not the last. Many other people have since sought refuge in the tangled maze of tropical islands.



Arthur Darwin, hermit of Posseum Key

Arthur Leslie Darwin

Many people have lived on a small island called Posseum Key during the last hundred years, but perhaps the most interesting is Arthur Leslie Darwin. He was the most recent occupant of Posseum Key and had the distinction of being the last private resident on park lands.

The United States government took over the island called Posseum Key as part of the National Park system in 1953. No more private residents were to be allowed to live within the park area. Because he had lived on Posseum Key since 1945 and was a very old man, Darwin was given life tenure on his island. Later a park ranger, Lee Dillon, said, "He sure had us fooled. We only gave him a year or two at the most."

Posseum Key is located at the southern tip of the Ten Thousand Islands on Florida's lower Gulf coast. It is about 100 miles west of Miami and 40 miles south of Naples. After Everglades City, the only way one can reach the island is via a boat trip through desolate bayous that wind and weave through a myriad of small keys, all covered with dense mangroves.

The Key has seven or eight acres of land and a history of almost continuous occupation since the 1880's. It is tucked away in the maze of islands some eighteen miles southeast of the town of Everglades. Its relatively high elevation, fertile soil, and its location on a deep channel protected from Gulf storms by a fringe of mangrove islands account for its importance. It acquired the name "Chevelier Place" when Jean Chevelier established himself there late in the 1880's. The coast and Geodetic survey map of 1889 shows this site and also the one on Chatham Bend, shortly to be known as the "Watson Place" or the "Raymond Place."

Darwin did not begin his life in the Ten Thousand Islands on Posseum Key. In 1935 he became a trapper living at a Gene Hamilton's place at Lostman's River. He lived and trapped there for eight years, trapping otters and raccoons in the summer and hunting alligators in the summer.

For three years, from 1942 to 1945, he worked and lived in the Chokoloskee-Everglades City area. Most of his work was as a carpenter for the various boat builders of the area.

In 1945 Darwin finally decided to retire to Posseum Key. He began his life there in a tent but soon found this was not the best permanent living arrangement. Using cement he brought in from Everglades, shell from nearby islands, and sand from Pavilion Key, he made his own concrete blocks. He used these blocks to make a small house which he lived

in for many years.

His one room cabin was very primitive as he had no electricity or running water. There was a cistern near the cabin which enabled Darwin to exist with, as he said, "just the rain." In the center of his fourteen by sixteen foot shack was his bed covered by a thin blanket. Other than the bed, the only furniture was a propane gas stove, an open grill, and a small trunk covered with ancient magazines and newspapers. Along one wall he had built a narrow shelf where he stored his canned goods. His main cooking utensil was a large old fashioned iron skillet.

Darwin's cabin had windows but no glass. Screens and wooden shutters were used in an attempt to keep mosquitoes outside. This, of course, was impossible to do. Once when he was asked about the mosquitoes he said, "They're not too bad in the winter," brushing a dozen from his cheek, "but they are in the summer. I've never got used to them"

To help support himself on his island, Darwin grew banana, guava, lime and coconut trees. "I had 6,500 banana stalks on ten acres one time," he said. "I also grew vegetables and raised rabbits. I'd load up the boat and take a load to Everglades City every couple of weeks. But I got too old."

Nature also entered in his reason for giving up farming. As the prop roots of the mangrove trees pushed them farther and farther into the island, the willow trees were pushed out. Then the tannic acid from the mangrove roots killed all the grass. With their food supply gone, the rabbits, deer and bobcats left the island too.

Even after he no longer went to Everglades City to sell produce and game he still made a monthly trip to civilization. Firing up his five horse power motor he would go by boat to Chokoloskee Island for supplies.

While on Chokoloskee Island he would pick up his seventy-two dollar Social Security check and then buy his supplies for the next month. After he bought the canned goods he needed, he would drink a few beers and then return to Posseum Key.

The trip to Everglades City or Chokoloskee took about two hours each way which may account for the fact that he seldom left his island. He even weathered four or five hurricanes on Posseum Key and once said, "They don't do nothing."

Visitors to Posseum Key were not numerous although Darwin did say, "A lot of boats drop anchor here and give me extra fish they have caught and sometimes a can of beer."

It was rumored that when alligator poaching was a thriving business in the islands, Darwin would let the poachers know where the big gators were located. His pay was usually in beer.

Although he had few visitors, Darwin did know what was going on in the outside world. He had a battery operated radio in his house and told a reporter, "I can keep up with the date until my batteries run out, and I use kindling wood on the grill after the gas is gone." When his radio is

working, he keeps up fairly well with world news, although he professed little interest. "I don't care anything about the space news," he said. "I don't have any interest in the moon. If God had wanted us to go to the moon, He'd build us a concrete road."

When first coming to the island, Darwin made money by selling foods. "Apples and bananas sell best," he reported, "but the horse banana is sturdiest and will take more salt." His best customers were people along the coast accustomed to preferring the taste of local bananas. Darwin fished and hunted at times, and built a few boats, but he later retired on an old age pension. Over the years he said he had killed twenty six rattlesnakes on Posseum Key.

Darwin also grew native plants for his own use. He once showed a visitor where he was clearing a path to his cabin. Later, he pointed to some aloe plants that he was growing at the side of the House. "It's a cure for most anything," he said of the succulent plant, "and makes good tea as well!"

As he grew older, Darwin abandoned fishing and gardening. "About all I do now is read and chop kindling. I have to do that," he said.

Darwin was born in Arkansas. He was living in Texas in 1943 with his wife and nine children when he decided to leave to avoid taking a WPA job. He and a companion worked their way around to Key West trying to get into the commercial fishing business. They were not successful as the effects of the depression were still being felt.

Several years after he left Texas his wife died. Eight of his nine children he never saw again. One son, Luke, visited his father and then settled in Everglades City. On occasion, Darwin would even stay overnight with Luke.

In 1945, when Darwin began living alone on Posseum Key, he was eighty years old. At the age of ninety-five, he survived Hurricane Donna by taking refuge at Everglades City. After the storm he again returned to Posseum Key.

At the age of ninety six Darwin's five foot five inch frame was bent from the years. He walked with a hesitant stumbling gait, his face was weathered and liver-spotted but his eyes were still clear and blue.

In his later years Darwin told a reporter, "I hunted all over the area for two years before finally deciding on Posseum Key. I wasn't looking to get away from the world, I just liked it here."

Darwin was never one to give advice to others or make clever comments about his life. He had no deep religious or philosophical reasons for becoming a hermit nor did he dream up devices to keep from becoming lonely. He kept no books in his cabin and when asked what he did all day he said, "I cut weeds in my front yard. It's not in my nature to get lonely."

During his last years on Posseum Key, Darwin became so well known that even the National Park seemed quite proud of him. In the fall of



Darwin by the small house he built using homemade concrete blocks of cement, shell, and sand.

1970 Everglades City had a carnival and invited Mr. Darwin to take part. He sat in a small booth and people paid twenty-five cents to talk with him for three minutes. Even though Arthur Darwin was a real hermit, he seemed to enjoy being a celebrity and visiting with people.

Darwin stated sadly, "When I first came here, this place was a paradise. There was all the birds and fish and animals anybody could want. But they changed all that when they lowered Lake Okeechobee. No, it's not like it used to be, that's for sure. If I wasn't so old, since everybody else has left, I'd leave, too. But guess I'll stay here till I die."

According to his son, Arthur Leslie Darwin died in 1977 at the age of 112. His son, Luke, now lives alone on a houseboat docked on the Barron River in Everglades City. Perhaps he will carry on the hermit tradition begun by his father, the hermit of Posseum Key.



Martha Frock

Martha Frock

Back in the Everglades about six miles from any passable road lives Martha Frock, a youthful sixty-two year old lady who has taken a ten acre piece of swamp and turned it into a perfectly livable spread. The land was bought as an investment before she was even aware of where the acreage was actually located. Only after having it surveyed was she able to pinpoint the landmarks.

Martha discussed why she decided to build on the land. "I liked it out here," she said. "I decided to build a little shack and maybe come out here and raise a garden, raise some pigs or something.

I built the shack by myself. I bought an old jeep from Suppie Morse, a real estate seller out here, and I brought materials in on it. I had never built a thing before — not even a bird house. I had an awful time building it. I really did. I would put something together and find out it was wrong and have to tear it apart. You know, the hardest thing to do was to get it level. It took me the longest time to get the base level.

My shack sits on concrete blocks. I have two blocks, one on top of the other, which makes it sixteen inches off the ground. I used 2 x 6's and nailed the plywood onto that."

This shack, as she called it, would become her weekend hideaway from the densely populated area on the east coast of Florida where she lived.

After she built the first room of the building, Martha decided to build an addition. "I got to the point where I felt I had to have more room so I built on the back and made a screened porch. It was just screened in with a roof over it, of course. Every time I put a chair or anything out there, if it was something that couldn't get wet, I would have to bring it back inside. I decided I needed just that much more room, so I started closing it in. I did not paint anything as I couldn't afford it. So it was in the weather without paint and it finally rotted away. Then I tore all the rotted wood off and rebuilt it and even put in windows that someone gave me."

With the new addition Martha's shack became quite roomy. Later she made other additions using materials from camps that had been purchased by the government and torn down.

Martha moved to Florida in 1957. She was born in Michigan where she grew up; than at the age of seventeen she moved to Wisconsin where she lived for twenty years until moving to Florida.

"I lived on the East Coast for a while," she related. "First I lived in Deerfield Beach and then in Pompano. When I first moved there I lived in



Martha's home in the Everglades

a trailer at a place called Tropical Park. I moved to another trailer and then I finally bought a house.

I never did have a good job. I did waitress work, and I did newspaper routes, and neither one pays. I mean I didn't work in any fancy nightclubs or anything like that. I worked for some friends of mine who came to Florida from Wisconsin about the same time I did. They just had a little ol' lunch room that could seat maybe eighteen people at the most. If I got a dime tip once in a while that was all. Mostly working people ate there. I only made a dollar an hour, and at the same time I had the paper route. At that time I worked from six in the morning until about eleven at night."

Martha discovered that there was a great amount of book work to a paper route. At one time she delivered papers twice a day — the Ft. Lauderdale News and the Sun Sentinel. Eventually the newspapers limited carriers to only one route a day.

"After a while," she continued, "It was changing so much over there and I was getting kind of disgusted. There was too much traffic, too much noise and I wanted to get out of there.

I especially wanted to see what my land in the Everglades was like. Well, first I went to the man in Miami who had sold me the land and told him I wanted him to show me my land. He said he couldn't as he didn't

have any idea how to find it. Then he sent me to another real estate man who said he could take me pretty close to it. So he brought me out in this area a couple of times, but he couldn't find any survey markers like he was looking for. I finally decided to have it surveyed. After they surveyed it I came out and found the markers. That was when I decided to build my shack."

On a hot and humid day in the middle of June, 1979, a group of inquisitive students and two teachers ventured out to locate this lady hermit whom they heard about named Martha. As they approached the house, a dog began to bark and from inside someone yelled, "Don't let him scare ya."

Martha stepped to the door of her wood frame house. "I don't think he'd bite anybody," she continued as she held on to a small black dog. "It's just that he's not used to this — not at all. He's been away from people for a long time. Let's try to sit on the porch. I think there's a few more chairs there. Hope the mosquitoes don't eat you up."

After everyone was seated she looked around and, noticing that the dog was at her feet, said, "Well, he's over his little spell of barking now. Most everything around here belongs to that dog. Looks like a dog's house instead of a person's house. There's people who just won't let dogs in their house. Not me! Tigger is family. He's got beds all over this house. I picked them up a couple of times this morning because I thought it would look too bad to have all these dog beds around. Of course, he's got that one chair in the middle room he took for a bed too. I just let him have it."

"You know, Tigger's only a couple of years old," she said as she patted his head. "He belonged to a family that lived on Turner River Road and sold out to the government. They moved to a trailer park in Miami and couldn't keep him. I didn't want to take him as I wanted a female dog. But he turned out a lot better than I thought.

"He was no watch dog when he came here, but he is now. A couple of boys came over here on their three wheeled Hondas and Tigger wasn't going to let them get off.

"I can go to sleep at night and not have to worry about someone sneaking up on me and me not know it. Boy, with Tigger around I don't have to worry."

Martha went on to say that she has had very little trouble with intruders since moving into the Everglades. In fact there has been only one instance of trespassing that really bothered her.

"I guess it was either the first or second year I was here," she told the group. "A group of young fellows from Miami came out and built a camp over there. They didn't own the land. They just picked a good spot, brought in the materials on a swamp buggy, and built themselves a camp.



Martha and a few of the photography students who visited the lady hermit.

"I went away one Saturday and they came over here. They took a five gallon can of gas and a pair of rubber boots that I had sitting out in the yard. That night they had a bonfire and were whooping it up. About two o'clock in the morning two of them got on their swamp buggy and started wheeling it over here.

They didn't know if anybody lived here and I didn't have any lights on. They parked the buggy out in the field. I was outside with my shotgun that time watching them. I had figured they would come sneaking over here because they had stole that other stuff, so I stayed outside from nine o'clock on. I wanted to be outside where I could see 'em and hear 'em.

I was close enough I could hear what they were saying. They were going to take their shoes off so no one would hear them and sneak over to my buggy and steal it.

They flashed a real bright light all over, but I was standing where they couldn't see me. They got off the buggy and started over here and darned if my dog I'd left in the house didn't start barking and scared them back to their buggy."

She later reported the incident to the Sheriff's Department and Lt. Keene had a talk with the guys. He could identify the gas can from

Martha's description and took it back to her. The boys were told to pay her for the gasoline they had used. They told Lt. Keene they had run out of gas and had come over to get some and intended to pay it back.

When the intruders finally came to pay her for the gasoline, Martha saw them coming and stepped out into the yard with her shotgun. "If you're the ones that was out here that night with your buggy," she told them, "I want you to know that my dog saved your life! I was gonna shoot you. And don't give me any lies about running out of gas. I heard you and I seen you that night — both coming and going.

Out here in these woods there ain't nobody gonna' look after me. I'm gonna be looking after myself. Anybody that comes bothering me, I don't ask no questions and I don't give any commands. I shoot."

She asked the boys, "I didn't tell you to get the devil out of here that night did I? I didn't ask you what you were doing here neither did I? That's not the way I operate."

After telling about her experiences with the trespassers, she went on to explain more about the way she survives in the swamp. She has very few modern conveniences in her home, since she has no electricity. Her stove, refrigerator and two lights all run on propane gas. Her hot water is heated by the pilot light on the stove, but she doesn't use much since she appreciates a good, cold bath. Her water is all pumped in by hand from a pitcher pump in her back room. The well where she now draws her water is one she helped dig herself. During the weekends while the well diggers were away, Martha would work it. She would pick up the bell-shaped hammer and pound the casing down in the ground — sometimes ten inches during an afternoon."

Martha mentioned how hot it was and explained how she tried to keep cool. "I usually have rugs on the floors, but I take them up in the summer. I just roll them up and put them in the shed. The cool floor helps to keep the house cool. I also pile palm fronds on the roof to keep it cooler inside. I put a whole lot of them up there. I cut them off the trees 'cause I want green ones — not dry ones. So I go out and saw 'em off, bring 'em in and put 'em on the roof. One day the breeze was blowing real good so I'd throw 'em and the breeze would help put 'em up there. Most of the time though I got to get a ladder and carry them up."

When asked about how she gets around, she said, "Well, it's been real tough. I have to go around begging people to take me to the store. I've got a car but it won't run and the tag and inspection is expired. I try to get a ride with someone to go to Naples to do my shopping, cause I can't afford to shop around here. I might eat one or two days out of the week and the rest of the time I'd go hungry. So about once a month or even every six weeks, I have to go out and find someone that will take me to Naples to get my groceries. I try to keep stock on hand by getting a lot of canned goods and twenty pounds of potatoes. I feel pretty safe when I have that much on hand."



Martha's homemade heating stove.

"I've been doing a lot of walking since my buggy isn't in good running condition either," she continued. "I walk out to get my mail over at Ochopee and that's a seven mile trip. It takes me all day so I try to walk when it's not too hot and the mosquitoes aren't too bad. The other day I had to go to the post office and then I decided to go to a neighbors over on Burdine Road so I walked about seventeen miles all told."

One question that concerned the group visiting Martha was "Do you get bored and lonely living out here by yourself?"

Martha found the question almost amusing. "There's usually not enough time to get lonely," she replied. "There's more work around here than you can imagine. For instance, when laundry day comes I don't just

go and throw my clothes into a machine and push a button. I gotta' pump all that water to wash by hand and then pump all the water to rinse with. I have to hang them up and take them down. It takes quite a little while. Everything is done the hard way out here.

And then there's outside work to do — trimming things. I have to trim the trees, trim the bushes and cut the grass once in a while. My mowers have been broke down for quite a few years so I use a scythe blade and scissors to cut the grass.

I have my radio for entertainment and I usually have it on most of the day and night. One of my neighbors gives me old magazines. They're several years old. But, ya know, if you haven't read 'em, you haven't read 'em; so it doesn't make any difference. I'm glad to get 'em.

I love to read but how could I get anything out here unless I got to town to the library? Can't very well do that. I read almost anything except some old 'dirty' books."

Looking around the house one could see that Martha also spent some of her time canning as there were home canned foods on a shelf in the kitchen. She said that she doesn't do much canning although her neighbors do bring over the rinds of watermelon every once in a while for her to make pickles.



Part of Martha's ten acres after being cleared.

"They've offered me \$350 an acre for my land," Martha said. "And I'm sure I don't have to sell for that price. You know, if I advertised and the government wasn't sticking its nose in things out here, I'm sure I could get more than \$350 an acre for it. I think it's absolute robbery — that's what it is!

I'll tell you I have cleared all this island here. I've chopped those palmettos out with an ax and a grubbin' hoe. It was just a tangled mess when I cleared it and I did it all by myself. Now they come along and want to give me \$350 for the land.

The government told me I could stay if I want to, but I'm only allowed to keep three acres. The quiet out here in the swamp has been like a little bit of heaven to me, but I don't think I'll stay. The only thing I want is a fair price for my place."

In May of 1980 Martha Frock was still living on her land in the Everglades. If she must move in the future, hopefully she can find another secluded area where she can feel so comfortable and secure. Her feeling about her present home was revealed best by one of her comments to the visitors. "Coming back here's just like going to heaven."



The land behind Martha is uncleared. Most of her property looked like this before she worked on it.



Roy Ozmer

Roy Ozmer

Roy Ozmer was known as the Hermit of Pelican Key. He had been a newspaperman, actor, seaman and man of many jobs. He was born January 21, 1899 in Decatur, Georgia, on a cotton plantation.

At the age of sixteen, Roy and a step-brother ran away from home and joined a merchant ship sailing for foreign ports. He had hoped to join the Navy at eighteen, but was unable to do so because he had a deformity in his knee joint. He then decided to see the world on his own. He explored countries all over the world on every continent except Australia.

After traveling throughout the world, he came into Everglades on a boat from Ft. Myers. At this time a boat was the only means of transportation into Southern Florida. He joined the crew of builders with the Collier Corporation and soon was superintendent of the paint crew. He mixed paints, supervised the work and was time keeper.

Every winter found him in Everglades and every summer in Blairsville, Georgia, doing contract painting, fishing, hunting, and mostly reading and writing.

During this period of time Roy sold much of his writing. It has been said that articles he sent to the **Atlantic Journal** were never refused. His writings were short and well done. They were mainly about nature, people, interesting places, animals, birds, other wildlife, and stories of the sea, land, and travel.

Mrs. Ozmer told us what she found interesting about Roy. She said, "Roy had a keen mind and learned fast. All his life he read a great deal. His family was amazed when, as a young boy, he not only was soaking up stories of the sea, his favorite, but he was reading books on history, science, geology, and others. He read the history of the rise and fall of nations and found that the greed and despotism of a few and powerful had destroyed the lives and happiness of the many and helpless.

Even during his world travels when he stopped in a city, instead of standing on a street corner and passing the time of day with the gang, he would stroll off to the library and soon be lost in a good book. He read biographies of some of the great men, by the world standards, and found that there too, ambition and pride reared its ugly head. He observed the words and actions of many of his contemporaries. Whether common man, president, king or potentate, and found man to be victim to littleness and evil habit.

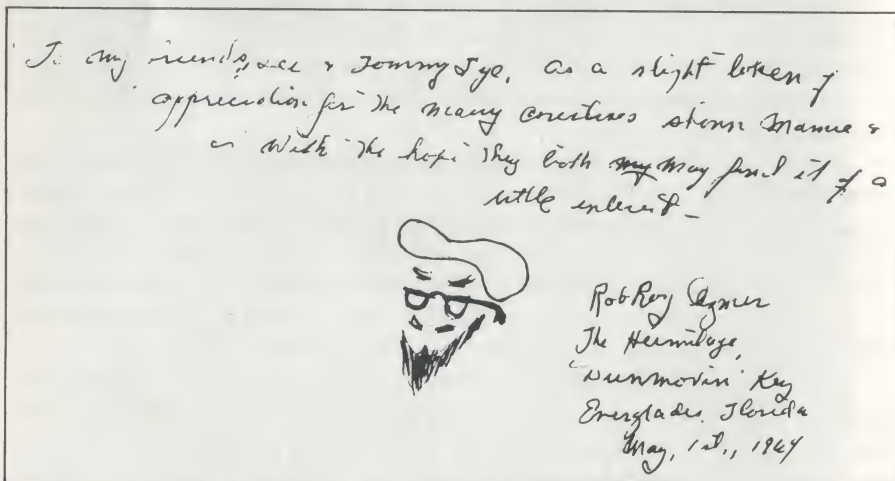
All of Roy's reading was unable to help him fight the evil habit which was finally to drive him to become a hermit on Pelican Key. He was an

alcoholic who worked hard trying to cure his habit of drinking, but he was never able to take even a social drink. He lived seventy years trying to fight his craving for a drink to relax his tension. Finally he removed himself from alcohol by living the life of a hermit on a deserted tropical island."

Roy Ozmer settled on Pelican Key, off the coast of Everglades City in 1950. He hung a statement to a seagrape tree by his shack to explain his reason for living the life of a hermit. He quoted naturalist John Burroughs, "I came here to find myself; it's so easy to get lost in the world."

Roy was a tall, thin, bearded man who almost always wore a red beret. In fact, he signed his writings with a small sketch of himself in the beret. He made a meagre living by fashioning souvenirs of driftwood, shells and other marine specimens, and from time to time wrote a column for the Collier County News.

While living on Pelican Key he made many collages with driftwood and scrapwood, framing them with discarded rope from the fishermen's old nets. Many of these collages went to homes in the Everglades City area, into many states, and foreign countries. Each one was free for Roy was generous with his time and talent. His largest collage is hanging in the Sunset Lodge at the mouth of the Barron River. When his wife, Mamie Ozmer, tried to buy it for her son after Roy's death the proprietor of the lodge asked \$3,000.00. Of course, she was unable to buy it.



A note written to friends signed with a sketch of Roy in a beret.

Mamie Ozmer said that money and things meant very little to her husband. He never asked for much — only elbow room to find reasonable comfort and fulfillment. She described him as a soft spoken, courteous, intelligent, little man, a friend who would divide his last crumb of bread

or his last drop of water. He would spend his last penny or his last ounce of gas to take someone where they needed to go and ask nothing in return.

Roy enjoyed people — all people. He looked forward to entertaining and tolerated curiosity seekers.

He was famous for his hospitality to all visitors. He would meet them with a friendly hand shake and a cup of black coffee — which he liked to spell, "kauphy." He was always ready to share what he had with anyone who was in need, even if it was only a cup of rain water on a hot dry day.

Mr. Ozmer was so hospitable and friendly that his shack became a regular stop for sight-seeing boat tours through the Everglades National Park. It has been said that in the 1950's Roy was the most photographed person in the United States. He was once featured on television on the David Brinkley show.

Other visitors to Pelican Key included Jimmy Dolittle, who bought a Guava plant in a six-inch pot for the mayor of Mexico City. The mayor had been on Pelican Key and had seen Roy's more than three-hundred and fifty tropical plants from many parts of the world.

The entire cast of **Wind Across The Everglades**, including Tony Galanto, Burl Ives, and Gypsy Rose Lee, visited Roy on Pelican Key. After this visit, he hung a sign above his bed which said, "Gypsy Rose Lee slept here."

He had other signs placed around his island. For example:
A large sign on the pier —

**I will cash your check
Tend your baby
Fix your motor
Give you coffee and bread
But I will not go fishing**

A large lettered sign along a path —

4 U 2 P N

Over a large stone hung from a heavy wire —

Barometer

**When stone is standing
straight out it's a sure
sign a hurricane's brewing**

Ozmer remained on Pelican Key from his arrival in 1950 until Hurricane Donna raked over the sandy key sweeping it bare in September of 1960. His home and nearly everything on the island was washed away. He spent the time during the hurricane at the Everglades City Court House shelter. The destruction of his cabin solved a problem for the officials of the Everglades National Park. Although the park regulations forbid private homes, Ozmer was already established and had invested money in his cabin and other buildings and gardens. The park officials were reluctant to evict him after the storm. Supt. Warren Hamilton said, "We will not approve the construction of a new building, in line with policy of the National Park Service to restore park lands to as near natural condition as possible."

For a short time Roy returned to Erwin, Tennessee, one of his haunts before settling on the Southwest Florida coastal island. It didn't take him long to decide he wanted to return to the Everglades. He came back and re-built on Panther Key, about 10 miles from Everglades City. He lived without running water, lights or refrigeration and only a dog as constant companion but shortly he began to have a steady flow of visitors again. Among the visitors was Anne La Bastille Bowes, a reporter for the Collier County News.

This is her description of her visit with the "Hermit of Pelican Key."

Some local fishermen directed us to an island not far from where we had anchored our big boat. We sped up to a weather-beaten dock, jumped ashore and headed for a quaint house under a huge poinciana



Roy Ozmer, the hermit of Pelican Key and E. Foster Atkinson, the hermit of Dismal Key, 1965.

tree. A jolly, bearded man appeared and introduced himself as Foster Atkinson, a hermit. I was nonplussed. He wasn't the right one. How many hermits could there be along this wild coast?

This is Dismal Key, but Roy's not far from here," said Foster. "I'll be glad to take you there." slapping a captain's hat on his head, he called for "Midnight." We looked around, expecting a big black dog. Instead, a small goat bounced up. Midnight loves boat rides and she stood in the bow, alert and proud, the whole way.

At Panther Key, Foster gave a holler. Soon, a tall, gangly, bearded man came out of a small cabin dressed in red beret and specs. Here, at last, was my writing colleague. We shook hands all around and Roy immediately pumped up his primus for a pot of his superduper, rain-water java.

We sat and talked for some time while Midnight gobbled Roy's potted plants and we gobbled cookies. Scattered on tables around the shady grove were artifacts Roy had uncovered on his island. There were cannon balls, shackles, odd pieces of iron, etc., all reputed to be from Pirate Gomez's camp which was also located on Panther Key. True to its name, the key played host last year to a real puma who ungraciously attacked Roy's dog. The size of its pug marks left no doubt that it was one of these very rare cats.

Visitors kept arriving as we relaxed there and it was plain to see that Roy was a good host and well-known in the area. A hermit's life today seems to be far from the solitary existence pictured by Thoreau in his book, "Walden." Thanks to outboards, cars and planes (basically the gasoline engine), a person has a hard job trying to find



Fishermen made good use of Ozmer's houseboat on Hog Key. This was Ozmer's last home in the Ten Thousand Islands.

privacy in this crowded world. And it's going to get worse . . .

Nevertheless, both Roy and Foster seem happy with their lot, being the only two people on twenty miles of coastline. They have found the best of two worlds — the peace, purity and primitiveness of outdoor life enhanced by some comforts from the world of science, technology and "civilization."

Roy Ozmer became ill, returned to the home of his son in Erwin, Tennessee and died October 31, 1969. He donated his body to a Medical Research school in Tennessee because of a rare bone structure which medical authorities wished to study.

Roy Ozmer was a hermit not because he didn't like people but because of a personal problem. Of the number of visitors on his lonely island, Ozmer once said, "I've foregone society, but if the world wants to come out and share a cup of coffee or talk over a problem, it's all right with me."

The Nazarene



*Why do you call Him "NAZARENE"?
That's the silliest thing I've ever seen!
Why, He stays out there on Panther Key
Never even losing sight of me —
Yet — you call Him — "Nazarene"!
Years ago in my "wander-jahr,"
My youthful follies led me far —
Yet He was there in seaport towns,
I met Him too, on Sussex Downs —
Still — you call Him — "Nazarene"?
Away back there in forty-two
We deck hands had a rough job to do
Saw Him there, at "North seventy three"!
Night raft and I alone at sea
Why should we call Him — "Nazarene"?
He is "a most Remarkable Man"
Never leaves New York, yet in Japan
We find Him always . . . everywhere!
Fleeing Him here, we meet Him there
Still He's called "A Nazarene"!
Known in palace, brothel and hut,
Known to rogues, who cringe, and Lords who strut
Known to all, yet by no one known
While seeing Him everywhere, still we're prone
To merely call Him "Nazarene"!
He's no mere earthling, so lets not
Try to pin Him down to a single spot
His home is China, 'cross the sea
Just as much as in Galilee
Isn't it the silliest thing you've ever seen
To call the Super Universal . . . "A Nazarene"?*

*Robt. Roy Ozmer
Panther Key
Everglades, Florida
1965*

A poem written by Roy Ozmer



Leon Whilden — The Hermit of the Everglades

Leon Whilden

Leon Whilden grew up in Copenhagen, Denmark where his father was the United States ambassador. He tired of living in Denmark and moved to Miami, Florida in 1945. At this time he was employed by the Curtis Wright Company as an engineer which meant doing a great deal of traveling. He began looking for a place to settle and started building in the Everglades on November 11, 1949. He then gave up his \$72,000 a year job and moved to the Everglades.

During the thirty years he has lived on his thirteen acres he has turned them into a garden spot for orchids and other native and exotic plants. The U.S. government is now trying to buy his land as it is in the heart of the Big Cypress National Preserve.

"The government offered me \$34,000 for this place," he said, "and that's plumb near crazy. That don't even pay for the parking lot that was hauled here out of Miami. My first check for fill was more than that to Marsh and Company back in November 1949.."

Whilden spends some of his time cutting out the trees that are becoming too thick on his property. His reaction to the park service telling him not to thin out the trees is, "I know what trees should be trimmed and I'm gonna' trim them so they'll grow big. They don't own this land yet. When they do, they can let all the little seedlings grow up, but when they get too crowded I cut them."

Another hermit tried to tell Leon how to care for his plants and this advice was received in much the same way as the government's.

"Roy Ozmer used to want to come and help me here," he said. "He had his ideas and I had mine and they clashed. He worked for a forestry department, so he thought that he knew something about orchids. He didn't know anything about the Everglades and could have killed a bunch in a hurry and I told him so. That made him mad. I says 'I didn't ask you to come here. You came and asked me. I don't want you here. I do it myself and I do it like it's supposed to be done and then I don't want anyone else bothering it.'

You know, he stayed away after that. In fact, I don't think he ever came to see me after that. It never hurt my feelings because he never paid a bill for me.

I'm like this. It don't worry me what anybody thinks of me 'cause nobody's ever paid a bill for me but myself. That's including my thirteen children. None of them ever paid a bill for me."

When Whilden goes to visit one of his children he drives his large



Orchid Isles

van. He says, "I drive it when I want to spend the night, because I don't spend a night at anyone else's house. That includes my kids. They get all mad and say 'Daddy, why'd you drive that big thing up here. We've got plenty of room.'

Well, when their screaming little kids are running around when I'm ready to go to bed I get mad. If I've got my van, I go out, turn on the air conditioner and the TV and go to sleep."

According to Whilden, "It takes a trip around the world to visit all my children. One of my kids lives in Tampa, two of them live in Copenhagen, Denmark, two of them in Red China, seven in Australia and the last one in Greenland.

I went over to Geneva in March of 1979 to watch my grandson's wedding. I stayed for three hours and came back home. My boss just had a fit because I didn't spend any time over there. But I've been to Europe so much it's nothing to me. Hell, I've been around the world more than thirty times in my life.

I guess I've been all over the world except the United States, and I'm working on it. Some friends of mine live out in Dallas, Texas so about two years ago I called and said I was coming out to see them. I drove the Cadillac out, spent a couple of hours with them, then I came back. When I go visiting I don't like to stay around and have to make small talk.



Cypress trees lining a path through the swamp.

People get mad at me but when I'm ready to go, I go. There's no use in sitting around.

Another thing is that I'm like that when people come to visit me. If I'm ready to go to bed, I just say, 'Good-night, I'm going to bed now.'

There ain't no hesitating about it. I just tell them. You'd be amazed how many people think they've got to sit up and be miserable just to keep from hurting someone's feelings. Well, if they're not considerate enough to go on home when you ask them, then they're not considerate enough to be a friend of mine."

Leon Whilden has his own business named Orchid Isles which is advertised by signs along the Tamiami Trail. He sells orchids, ferns, bromeliads and other plants which he grows on his thirteen acres. But he only sells plants when and to whom he wants. He has been known to open the top half of a swinging door that serves as a barrier to his land, look out at a potential customer and say, "I'm not here." Recently he has been selling by appointment only.

His reaction to people who stop at his shop varies. He told about

some recent visitors from the north. "A couple came here who had a bunch of kids and I told them not to bring the kids in here. She said they'd come all the way from — and I wouldn't even let her finish. I said, 'Lady, you know, I don't even let my own grandchildren in here much less nobody else's. I got two mean dogs and I'm not about to sit and watch those kids. They will go over and try to pet the dogs. I let somebody in with children and I got bit trying to keep the dogs back.'

Well, those people left mad, but I'll never let anyone else in with a small child. Besides people ought to have enough sense to not think that a garden like this is for children."

Even the money he might make from the sale of a plant does not really interest him as he would simply use it to buy more orchids. When he does grudgingly allow a persistent flower lover into his garden, he explains all the reasons they should not buy anything. He graphically tells them all the reasons they should not buy as he outlines the precautions they would have to take to keep a plant alive even in Florida.

He told about his reaction to some people from Brooklyn whom he had allowed to tour his garden. "I made those people from Brooklyn so mad when they told me they wanted to buy a plant. I told them they didn't have sense enough to grow a plant. All they know how to grow is a cement slab, and that's a fact. They can kill more plants than anyone in the world."

A tour of his land is delightful — paths lined with Cypress needles weave through the swamp. Orchids and staghorn ferns are attached to the trunks of trees. Hundreds of plants grow in pots made from tree parts and swing from wires stretched between the trees. He will sometimes sell a potted plant but never one attached to a tree.

"Oh yes," Whilden laughed, "I sell bromeliads and orchids. Anything that's not on a tree. Anything that is on a tree is not for sale. Well, I'll sell the tree for \$1,000 plus the price of the plant. That makes people not want them."

To make money to support himself and care for his plants, Wilden works as a maintenance man at the Oasis Airport on the Tamiami Trail near Miami. He lives in a camper parked beside a large pond at the rear of his property. About life in a camper he said, "All I got to do is crank up and go where I want to go. I just take down my t.v. antenna, unplug and take off."

Whilden says that in the thirty years he's lived in the Everglades he never has gotten lonesome. "I never have any time to get lonesome," he explained. "Between this and that I keep busy. I cook for myself and freeze a lot of stuff so I cook in large quantities."

He also makes banana wine which he carries with him when he travels. Sanibel Island is his favorite place for spending a week-end away. He appreciates the fact that it is still unspoiled by the tall condominiums and feels it is one of the prettiest, as well as closest, places to visit.

"The first time I went to Sanibel," he said, "I didn't know a soul in the park but by the time I left I knew everybody there. You see, I carried a case of my banana wine; consequently, I knew everybody before I left for home."

Whilden does not look the part of the stereotyped hermit. He is clean shaven, has neatly trimmed hair and wears neat well fitting clothes. At one time he admits, he did try to dress the part — including long, stringy hair. But that became the style for young people so he changed.

Living alone in the Everglades is no problem for Leon Whilden but he said his children do get concerned.

"But Daddy what if you was to die out there?" one asked.

"You couldn't do a damn thing for me," Leon told him.

He went on to say, "I want to be cremated and after I'm cremated let everyone know I'm dead. I don't want any service or anything. You know this thing of soothing the living is a bunch of bull. That's all it is too — soothing the conscience of the living. Cause a funeral don't do the dead no good nor the living either. The living go in debt and then say, 'Oh, I did so and so for my Daddy.'"

"Why don't you do it while I'm alive instead?" he asked. "Then when I'm gone I want my ashes scattered over my place out here and let a tree grow."

Leon Whilden lives a lifestyle he truly enjoys. He said, "The newspapers called me a hermit and that made me mad. I even get letters addressed to 'The Hermit of the Everglades.' Me, I don't consider myself a hermit no more than I considered Roy Ozmer one. He just lived like I do — by myself."



Leon's home — A Dodge camper



Al Seely

Al Seely

Al Seely is originally a New Englander from Athol, Massachusetts. He was a machinist, professional musician, played double brass around Washington, D.C., a draftsman in Hydrographic Survey HQ, and served in the European Theater of Operations. He also served as a music therapist in the South Florida State Hospital. Seely got a medical discharge and was told that he had six months to live.

He has lived on Dismal Key, in the Ten Thousand Islands off the coast of Florida since 1969. There he lives in a seventy-five year old house, which was previously lived in by another hermit. Before Mr. Seely moved to Dismal Key he lived in a fishing hut on Panther Key for five years and in a tent on Brush Key for one year. Having lived in such a primitive way for six years he has found the house on Dismal Key to be most comfortable.

The building on Dismal Key has two main rooms. One room is Mr. Seely's bedroom and the other is a living room, kitchen, study, and studio combined. He has an old mattress over the back door to keep the animals out and a screen door in the front. The front screen door may be more of an attraction than a detriment to the mosquitoes, as it has many holes.

As you enter the front door of his home you first notice the many paintings on the wall. He paints, to both occupy his time and make money for his supplies. The paintings hanging on the wall or stacked in the corner range from nudes to sunsets to pelicans to Raymond Burr and even President Jimmy Carter.

To the right as you enter the front door is a small table holding his guest book. Unlike the popular idea that hermits don't like people, Mr. Seely enjoys having visitors. He keeps the names, addresses, and dates of visitations of all guests to his island. Many people stop the first time out of curiosity, but return frequently for interesting conversation.

The main room of his home consists of two cabinets, a kitchen table and chair, a sink, a desk, and a book case. The book case contains encyclopedias and an assortment of other books. His desk, which is located beside the book case, is where he sat to write his autobiography, which is entitled **The Phony Hermit of Dismal Key**. The book is yet to be published as he cannot afford to publish the book himself. He hopes to find a company to publish it for him.

His only light in the cabin is from a kerosene lamp, which makes both writing and painting practically impossible before sunrise and after sunset. Since he receives only three hundred dollars a year from the

Veterans Administration Pension, the money he makes from the paintings he sells is very useful. In fact, he has become so well known for his paintings that many people of the area come to his island to ask him to paint a special order for them.

Living on Dismal Key never seems to bore Mr. Seely. He reads, does crossword puzzles, paints, and cleans his house. When the weather is good he spends a great deal of his time clearing paths on the sixty-five acres, which makes up his island. The visitor brave enough to risk being covered by mosquitoes, which infest the island twelve months of the year, will enjoy walking along the paths and viewing the lush tropical vegetation. As part of Dismal Key is a high shell mound better than seventeen feet above mean high tide, the plant life varies from mangroves to royal palms.

Mr. Seely does not spend all his time on the island. He has an aluminum boat about twelve feet long, which is powered by an old fifteen horse power Johnson motor. He goes into Goodland, a small town south of Naples, to get supplies and gas for his vehicles. The vehicles consist of his motor and a law mower. While in Goodland he docks at the Coon Key Pass Marina. Anyone who wishes to visit Mr. Seely checks at Coon Key Pass Marina to see if he is on his island. If his boat is not docked there, he is at home.

During 1979, Mr. Seely spent eighty days away from Dismal Key, which was much more time than he wished to be away. His absences were necessitated by the desire to help his ex-wife with some problems and the need to visit a Veterans Hospital for his eyes. He recently discovered that he had glaucoma and is receiving treatment for his eye ailment.

Mr. Seely's only full time companion on the island is his black dog, Digger. In February 1980, both Mr. Seely and Digger spent two full days in Everglades City taking part in that town's annual Seafood Festival. Mr. Seely had paintings on display in a booth and was available to talk with natives and tourists. At the end of the Festival the mayor offered to take he and Digger back to their island the next afternoon saying, "I could take you back in the morning, but we would have to leave at six a.m."

Holding Digger in his arms Mr. Seely said, "we don't mind getting up early. We'll be ready at six, as both of us are anxious to get home."

Mr. Seely is a friendly, gregarious person; but he is a hermit in that being around many people for more than a short time is very tiring to him. Spending his life on Dismal Key is certainly not "dismal" to him.

The following is a part of Mr. Seely's story — in his own words as he related it to Buddy Brown and Brett Stokes.

I arrived in Everglades City in the afternoon of New Year's Eve, 1966. The next day was New Year's Day. I looked for the park ranger to get permission to go out and camp some place. I couldn't find him then.



Two of Mr. Seely's many visitors — Brett Stokes and Buddy Brown.

They told me he was in Chokoloskee so we went down to Chokoloskee. We couldn't find him down there either, but we found a motel and I think it is the first motel you come to. I don't know, he's got some sort of a marina and a field out back of it.

I told him the problem, that I was trying to find a camp and I was planning to go out and camp for awhile. He told me that I could camp at Comer Key. So by this time it was getting late in the afternoon and it was too late to make a start. So he said if I wanted to go on down to the field and pitch a tent for the night, it would be O.K. So we went down in the field and pitched the tent and spent New Year's Eve. We could hear the celebration in some gin mill up the line. I thought, "Boy, this is some funny New Year's Eve — sleeping in a tent in the middle of a field."

The next morning as soon as we could get stirred around I had this thirteen foot boat with a three and one half horse power motor. The guy in the motel told me that there were stakes that I could follow, and I had a foot locker full of clothes and a few more things that I would take out — and I thought for the first trip I would just take my foot locker — and see how I make out — and, of course, I didn't have the best luck in the world.

I went aground a couple of times and the motor conked out — and I had a hard time getting it started, but I got to Comer Key alright — but if I had some sense I would have looked around a little but I was fighting time and I just took the foot locker up and put it in some weeds because I

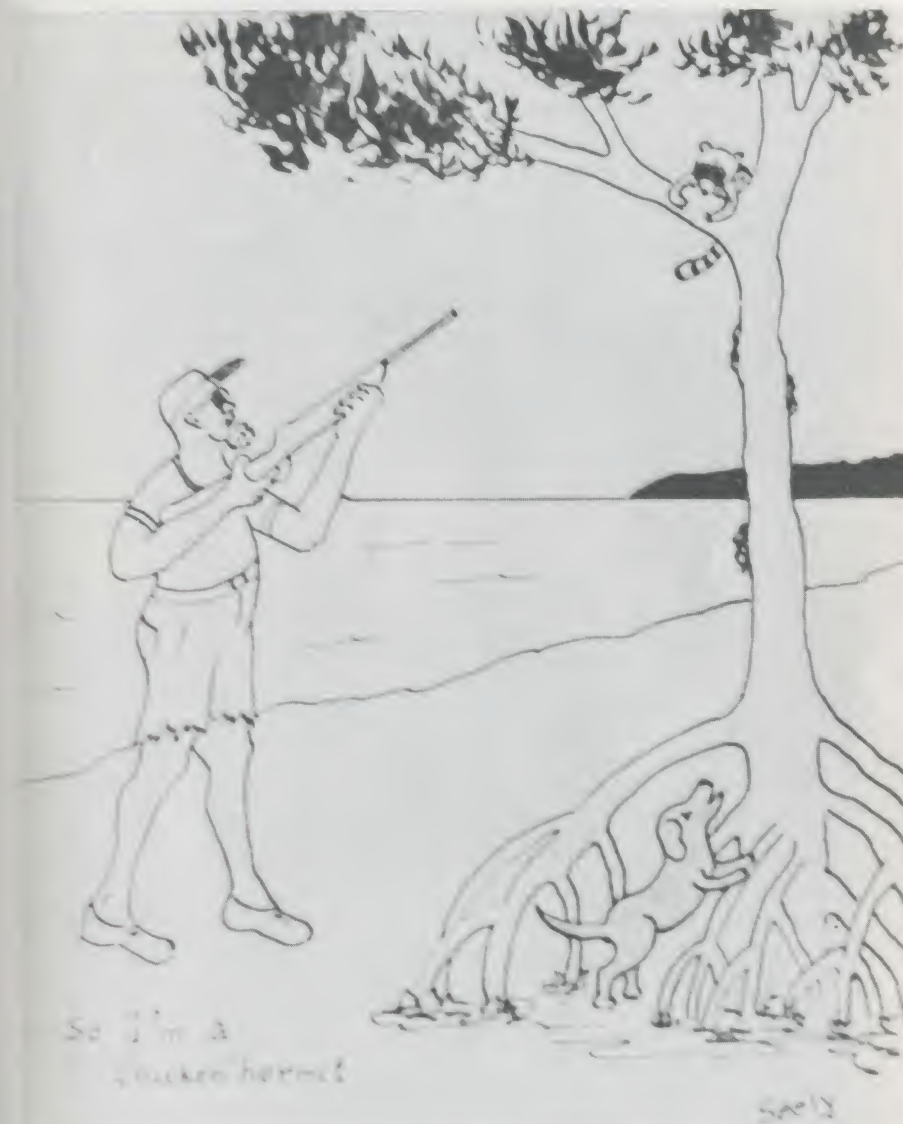


"... and the next thing I knew, I'm in water up to my chest and things floating all around me..."

knew that I was coming right back — you know — so I went to Chokoloskee and got my next load.

I had a box of canned goods I put in the bow of the boat and I started out again and by this time it had a pretty fair chop through that bay but it would not mean anything to any other boat — only one with about four inches of free board. And that box in the bow started to slop over and not having any experience with boats and motors at all, I thought I would just reach up there and move the box out of the way and I left the motor going and stepped up there to move it and about that time a wave came and washed over the bow of the boat and my weight and the force of the motor shoved the bow in the mud and the next thing I knew, I'm in the water up to my chest and things floating all around me and I look around me and I was not too far from shore.

I see a man fishing off the front porch of his house and I yelled at him. He didn't answer — didn't wave — didn't do nothing. Boy, I



Mr. Seely had intended to kill wild animals for food, but he found he was unable to do so.

thought this guy was something — seeing a guy out there sunk and not thinking nothing of it. Then about ten minutes later there were three boats out rescuing me and one of the boats started getting some of my things that was floating around — and there was another funny thing. When I bought my boat, it was to have floatations so I got out to see if it would come up. It came up alright and there I was stuck in the mud — and those men had to pull me out of the mud and get me aboard like an old catfish. And I was covered with mud from my knees down and sopping wet — and we got the boat and the motor and the motor was shot.

So a month later I went to Goodland and got hold of a charter man with a boat. He gave me some advice as to where I could stay and camp — on an island called Brush Key. I stayed there for eight months and it was three miles to Goodland and then I moved to Dismal Key for two months — by the way it was hurricane season. From there I moved to Panther Key — and I stayed there for five years. And from there back here to Dismal Key.



Mr. Seely and his dog, Digger, at the Everglades City Sea Food Festival.



Eardley Foster Atkinson

Eardley Foster Atkinson

*This is the story of the hermit Eardley Foster Atkinson
as told by another hermit — Mr. Seely.*

Eardley Foster Atkinson? I knew him. Knew him well. I even live in the same house as he did. Have been for the last fourteen years. I knew him for five years while I was living on Panther Key. Before that we visited back and forth. Oh yes, we were very good friends.

Without being disparaging, I would say he was a hell of a nice guy. He was one of the type of guys you occasionally encounter, however, who is doomed to fail at anything—that was him. He tried all kinds of different things. He was an alcoholic too. He tried newspaper work. He was a printer. He traveled all over the country, but usually by box car. He got a job printing for a fellow down in the keys at Key Largo. Somewhere down there the guy had a newspaper or something. Anyway, they got in a big fuss and Foster quit. He didn't know what to do with himself then. He heard there was a market for shells and at that time Marco Island Beach was deserted and an ideal place for shells. I think he lived in a tent out there, picking up shells, selling them and living the best way he could from hand to bowl.

There were two fellows who had a lease on Dismal Key and owned the house there. It just so happened that they were looking for a person to be sort of caretaker for the house and they heard of Foster being on Marco living in a tent. So they got hold of him and asked if he would come over here to Dismal Key and stay. They fixed him up with a boat and everything. Well, Foster accepted the offer and that is how he got to this place. He continued with the only income he had, selling shells, until he was old enough to get social security.

Foster went into Goodland, like I do, to do his marketing. But his idea of marketing though, it's a wonder he lived as long as he did! He would get a can of beans and eat it. Or sometimes he would eat half of them for dinner and the other half for supper. Day after day he would eat beans. He was a baker at one time, so he was pretty good at making bread and biscuits and stuff like that, but that corn meal and beans is about all he ever lived on.

Well anyway, after moving to Dismal Key he lived here for fourteen years. When he died I think he was seventy two years old. He died right out here on Dismal and that is an interesting story in itself.

I came to visit him about a week or two weeks before he died. While I was there another man came to visit him. He was a retired doctor living in Goodland. I heard the doctor tell him that if he didn't get into a



Foster Atkinson's house on Dismal Key is now the home of Al Seely



Dock and path leading to Mr. Atkinson's and Mr. Seely's house on Dismal Key.

hospital and get some treatment he was going to die. He, the doctor, just put it to him real blunt, "If you don't do something about this right away, you are going to die."

Well, knowing Foster like I did, I wasn't surprised to hear him say, "I'm past that. I'm on borrowed time anyway. Nobody is ever going to get me to go to any hospital."

Well the story came that this same doctor came back two weeks later and found him dead. But the thing is, some years later after I was living out here a man and his wife came to visit. They were both doctors from Naples. They said, "Oh, we are the ones who found Foster when he died."

So I don't know who really found him. All I know is how they found him — dead.

He died of a combination of things. Let's see, he died in April. About two weeks before Christmas he had got in his boat and went over to Goodland to see if he had some Christmas cards, mail or maybe a package at the post office. When he was coming home, he ran into a reef or an oyster bar and broke the lower unit on his motor. So he had to row the rest of the way home and it took him something like ten hours to do it, because he was in bad health anyway. He had emphysema, and you know, being breathless and rowing a boat — especially against the tide — well, it just about did him in right then and there; but he made it home. Well, the next day he had lost his voice. So he assumed, as all of us did, that he had got a chill or bronchitis or something that made his voice go. He tried all kinds of medicines but not a thing helped. His voice never did come back. Some say he probably had throat cancer. I don't know if that was so, but the last ditch cause of him dying was congenital heart failure. And I say that was brought on by malnutrition, because as his emphysema got worse after his ordeal, it took such an effort for him to walk around that he would lose his breath. He wouldn't or couldn't feed himself and he lost strength. Talk about the vicious circle —

But he was a very interesting person and pretty well educated too. He didn't go to college or anything, but he read a lot. He could discuss all kinds of things. Oh, and he liked visitors. He had a lot of them. He was a very popular man. He had been married, I think, two or three times. If you would ask him about being married, he would say that he didn't know if he was married or not. By which he meant that neither had he deserted his wife nor had she deserted him, but one way or the other he didn't know if she was dead or alive. It had been years since they had had anything to do with each other. Anyway, they never got a divorce.

Foster liked animals too. He had two different dogs while I knew him. They were both black. One was a little larger than Digger here. That one was a female named Tootsie. He had taught her a great number of tricks. He actually had some of these mullet fishermen believing that the dog could actually do these tricks — like mathematical problems.

He had one really cute trick. He would hold a piece of cookie or

something in his hand for the dog. Then he would say, "Alright now, this is simple. How much is two and two?" The dog would start to bark. When he got to four, he would drop his hand a little and the dog would stop. He would do that so the dog would know when to stop barking. He even worked out great big things in algebra. He would tell the dog all this stuff and get her to barking. It really was kind of clever how he did it all.

Then I had my dog. The one I said ran away. I never did see him again. anyway, my dog mated with Tootsie. As a result of that, Foster ended up with ten pups. He got rid of all of them but two. One he gave to me and the other one he kept. I lost mine eventually. He would never take his dogs with him when he went in the boat, so they would follow him — swimming. A lot of times he would come over here to see me and an hour or so later here came the dogs — three miles they would swim just to follow him.

Well, one day he got in his boat and the dogs apparently thought he was coming to see me. Instead of that he went to town. I wasn't home at the time. Anyway when he got back and the dogs were gone, he immediately thought of my place. He came over right away. Well the puppy was here but he never did find Tootsie. He thought maybe a shark must have gotten her. He kept the puppy till it grew up.

Anyway when he died he had a daughter from one of his marriages. She lived in Texas. She came and took care of all the funeral arrangements and took the dog back with her. I corresponded with her off and on. Finally she wrote and said that something had happened to the dog and she had to have it put away.

Foster wanted to be buried on his island. He even left word of it. He had written down some stuff that he wanted to be buried right here on Dismal Key, but there were laws and he couldn't get it done. They took him into Naples and he's there somewhere. I don't know where.

Henry Dalmas

Henry Dalmas first lived in Virginia and later moved to Ft. Myers Beach, Florida. He visited Mr. Seeley on Dismal Key and began to dream of living the life of a hermit. He spent weekends on an island when he could but always returned to Ft. Myers Beach as he felt he must make enough money to be able to support himself on an island. Finally, at the age of seventy-two he felt prepared. He had not intended to be as primitive as the rest of the hermits and had saved money to buy a generator to run his electric lights and power tools.

Henry was able to live on his island for only six months before he died.

Mr. Seely commented about Henry's short lived career as a hermit. "If you ever have any thoughts about becoming a hermit," he said, "you shouldn't wait until you are at death's door to do it. Do it now!"



"If you ever have any thoughts about becoming a hermit . . . do it now!"

— Al Seeley



The following sources were used for some information regarding area hermits:

Collier County Historical Museum

Collier County News

Collier County Semi-Centennial, 1923-1973

Daughtrey, Rufe, Hermit Leaves After Hurricane Wipes Out Home,
September 29, 1960

Douthat, L. Stration, A Space Age Hermit Lives

Naples Daily News

New York Times Service, Man, 94 Is Sole Resident of Isle

Tebeau, W. Charlton, Man In the Everglades, 1968



Prop Roots — Mangrove Trees

